



An image from a Hoover catalog in the 1920s. A woman wears a mask that measures her carbon-dioxide exhalation while she vacuums, in order to assess how much energy she is expending. The catalog promises that “Hoover offers the least fatiguing way of cleaning carpets and rugs.” From the Smithsonian Libraries’ [Trade Literature Collection](#).

## The Automation Charade

Astra Taylor

The rise of the robots has been greatly exaggerated. Whose interests does that serve?

Somewhere, right now, a manager is intoning to a broke, exhausted underling that someone is willing to do the same job for less—or, that some *thing* is willing to do it for free.

Since the dawn of market society, owners and bosses have revelled in telling workers they were replaceable. Robots lend this centuries-old dynamic a troubling new twist: employers threaten employees with the specter of machine competition, shirking responsibility for their avaricious disposition through opportunistic appeals to tech determinism. A “jobless future” is inevitable, we are told, an irresistible outgrowth of innovation, the livelihood-devouring price of progress. (Sadly, the jobless future for the masses doesn’t resemble the jobless present of the 1 percent who live off dividends, interest, and rent, lifting nary a finger as their bank balances grow.)

Though automation is presented as a neutral process, the straightforward consequence of technological progress, one needn’t look that closely to see that this is hardly the case. Automation is both a reality and an ideology, and thus also a weapon wielded against poor and working people who have the audacity to demand better treatment, or just the right to subsist.

But if you look even closer, things get stranger still. Automated processes are often far less impressive than the puffery and propaganda surrounding them imply—and sometimes they are nowhere to be seen. Jobs may be eliminated and salaries slashed but people are often still laboring alongside or behind the machines, even if the work they perform has been deskilled or goes unpaid.

Remarkable technological changes are indeed afoot, but that doesn’t mean the evolution of employment, and the social world at large, has been preordained. We shouldn’t simply sit back, awestruck, awaiting the arrival of an artificially intelligent workforce. We must also reckon with the ideology of automation,

and its attendant myth of human obsolescence.

## Overselling Automation

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This myth of human obsolescence was on full display when elites responded to the initial campaigns of the Fight for 15 movement. As exploited and underpaid fast-food workers went on strike across the country in 2013, agitating for little more than a livable wage, pundits scoffed that the protests would only spur employers to adopt fleets of burger-flipping robots. The Employment Policies Institute, a conservative think tank, took out a full-page ad in the *Wall Street Journal* to drive this message home—and presumably to persuade disenchanted food-service workers that they were lucky to have a job at all:

*Today's union-organized protests against fast food restaurants aren't a battle against management—they're a battle against technology. Faced with a \$15 wage mandate, restaurants have to reduce the cost of service in order to maintain the low prices customers demand. That means fewer entry-level jobs and more automated alternatives—even in the kitchen.*

Former McDonald's CEO Ed Rensi got plenty of press attention a few years later with similar comments. "It's not just going to be in the fast food business," Rensi said. "If you can't get people a reasonable wage, you're going to get machines to do the work... And the more you push this it'll just happen faster." Employers, he continued, should actually be allowed to pay certain groups—high school kids, entry-level workers—even less than the meager amount they currently get thanks to the floor set by federal minimum wage law.

Soon after making these remarks, Rensi provided gloating commentary for Forbes.com that his warnings about automation had already proven true.

“Thanks To ‘Fight For \$15’ Minimum Wage, McDonald’s Unveils Job-

Replacing Self-Service Kiosks Nationwide,” boasted the headline. Rensi could barely contain his glee—though he did gamely try to shed a few crocodile tears for the burger behemoth’s now-redundant corps of line workers. “Earlier this month, McDonald’s announced the nationwide roll-out of touchscreen self-service kiosks,” Rensi wrote. “In a video the company released to showcase the new customer experience, it’s striking to see employees who once would have managed a cash register now reduced to monitoring a customer’s choices at an iPad-style kiosk.”

In reality, what is actually striking when you watch that video is not the cybernetic futurism but rather just how un-automated the scene is. Work has not disappeared from the restaurant floor, but the person doing the work has changed. Instead of an employee inputting orders dictated by the customer, customers now do it themselves for free, while young, friendly-looking employees hover nearby and deliver meals to tables.

Rensi certainly had grounds to gloat—what mercenary corporation wouldn’t want to substitute paid staff with people who pay for the privilege of doing the work needed to keep the company afloat? But to grace this latest move toward the casualization of low-skilled service work with the somber moniker of “automation” exponentially oversells the shifting workplace dynamic. McDonald’s customers aren’t on the brink of some hyper-digitized foray into commerce that we might recognize from sci-fi fare like *Minority Report* or *Black Mirror*. Instead, they’re, if anything, on course to re-experience the rather quaint dining chambers of the midcentury automat.

Hence, I propose making our idea of automation itself obsolescent. A new term, “fauxtimation,” seems far more fitting.

## More Work For Everyone

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In its more harmless form, fauxtimation is merely a marketing ploy, a way to make pointless products seem cutting-edge. (The Tovala “smart oven,” for example, is Wi-Fi-connected and scans barcodes to glean reheating instructions for pre-made meals available through a subscription delivery service. Overpriced TV dinners cooked in an expensive toaster hardly live up to the slogan, “Cook your own ingredients with your smartphone.”)

The gap between advertising copy and reality can be risible. But fauxtimation also has a more nefarious purpose. It reinforces the perception that work has no value if it is unpaid and acclimates us to the idea that one day we won’t be needed.

Where Hollywood’s sci-fi futurism and leading tech pundits lead us astray, however, socialist feminism can lend invaluable insight, inoculating us against techno-capitalism’s self-flattering claims. The socialist feminist tradition is a powerful resource because it’s centrally concerned with *what work is*—and in particular how capitalism lives and grows by concealing certain kinds of work, refusing to pay for it, and pretending it’s not, in fact, work at all.

That women have special insight into technology shouldn’t come as a surprise: after all, they have been sold the promise of liberation through labor-saving devices since the dawn of mass consumerism, and this applies to kitchen appliances in particular. (It’s a short and rather sad leap from self-cleaning ovens to self-cooking ones.) Despite this, they have seen their workloads multiply, not diminish.

In her study *More Work For Mother: The Ironies Of Household Technology From The Open Hearth To The Microwave*, Ruth Cowan sheds astonishing light on the way innovations like electric irons and vacuum cleaners only added to the list of daily chores for women confined in the cult of domesticity. These

innovations also increased cleanliness standards—i.e., ramped up the productivity expectations for home workers as well as their workloads—while transforming housekeeping into a more gendered, solitary, time-consuming occupation. Here is an especially vivid reminder from our patriarchal past that automation isn't all it's cracked up to be, and hardly guarantees the absence of work.

But the relevant critique here runs deeper than simply observing that better living through technology was often an empty publicity slogan. Socialist feminists have long argued that women have been fed a lie—a lie that is increasingly foisted on the entire population, regardless of gender: they have been told their labor was not worthy of a wage and thus had no social value.

The Italian theorist Silvia Federici has tenaciously analyzed the ways in which feminized, domestic work—what she calls reproductive labor—is essential to capitalism even as capitalists and bosses refuse to acknowledge its productive existence. Beginning with her activism with the group Wages For Housework in the 1970s, Federici has argued that we must recognize the underappreciated, uncompensated labor that sustains everyday life, providing the foundation that underpins all manner of paid work recognized by the formal economy. Every bridge, every factory, every Silicon Valley app is merely the visible tip of a hidden iceberg of reproductive labor.

It's an insight that may seem obvious, but is actually revelatory. At the University of Toronto in 2017, I watched as Federici fielded an earnest question from a graduate student who said something about how automation would expand the reserve army of labor—Karl Marx's term for the multitude of workers without access to steady employment. The graduate student took for granted that, soon enough, there would not be enough work to go around and that many people would become surplus, expendable, and effectively irrelevant to society. Many in the audience nodded their heads in agreement—including me.

Federici's response was bracing. She vehemently denied the premise of the question—that we must acquiesce to the idea that, come the great automated apocalypse, masses of people would have no productive work to do: “Don't let them make you think that you are disposable,” she passionately proclaimed. At that moment, I realized the depth of Federici's insight. Her point is not that women have, historically, performed reproductive labor outside the sphere of waged work, that their efforts are supplemental to the real action. Rather, she insists that reproductive labor is utterly central: in its absence, the entire system would collapse.

The joint creation of social life is the very basis of all economic activity. There would be no GDP to contribute to without it, no assets to leverage or profits to hoard. We are more important and powerful than we have been led to believe—and the we in question here is no longer the marginalized ranks of women performing reproductive labor, but increasingly the postindustrial precariat at large.

## The Robotic Reserve Army

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As socialist feminism usefully highlights, capitalism is dedicated to ensuring that as much vital labor as possible goes uncompensated. Fauxtimation must be seen as part of that tendency. It manifests every time we check out and bag our own groceries or order a meal through an online delivery service. These sorts of examples abound to the point of being banal. Indeed, they crowd our vision in virtually every New Economy transaction once we clue into their existence.

One recent afternoon I stood waiting at a restaurant for a to-go meal that I had ordered the old-fashioned way—by talking to a woman behind the counter and

giving her paper money. As I waited for my lunch to be prepared, the man in front of me appeared astonished to receive his food. “How did the app know my order would be ready twenty minutes early?” he marveled, clutching his phone. “Because that was actually me,” the server said. “I sent you a message when it was done.”

Here was a small parable of labor and its erasure in the digital age. The app, in its eagerness to appear streamlined and just-in-time, had simply excised the relevant human party in this exchange. Hence the satisfied customer could fantasize that his food had materialized thanks to the digital interface, as though some all-seeing robot was supervising the human workers as they put together his organic rice bowl.

Our general lack of curiosity about how the platforms and services we use every day really work means that we often believe the hype, giving automation more credit than it’s actually due. In the process, we fail to see—and to value—the labor of our fellow human beings. We mistake fauxtimation for the real thing, reinforcing the illusion that machines are smarter than they really are.

Though omnipresent, fauxtimation can sometimes be hard to discern, since by definition it aims to disguise the real character of the work in question. *The Moderators*, a moving 2017 documentary directed by Adrian Chen and Ciarán Cassidy and released online through the Field of Vision series, provides a rare window into the lives of individual workers who screen and censor digital content. Hundreds of thousands of people work in this field, ceaselessly staring at beheadings, scenes of rape and animal torture, and other scarring images in order to filter what appears in our social media feeds.

If what we encounter on Facebook, OkCupid, and other online platforms is generally “safe for work,” it is not because algorithms have sorted through the mess and hid some of it from view. Rather, we take non-nauseating dips in the

digital stream thanks to the labor of real-live human beings who sit before their own screens day and night, tagging content as vulgar, violent, and offensive. According to Chen, more people work in the shadow mines of content moderation than are officially employed by Facebook or Google. Fauxtomatons make the internet a habitable place, cleaning virtual public squares of the sort of trash that would chase most of us offline and into the relative safety of face-to-face interaction.

Today many, though not all, of the people employed as content moderators live abroad, in places like the Philippines or India, where wages are comparatively low. The darkest tasks that sustain our digital world are outsourced to poor people living in poorer nations, from the environmentally destructive mining of precious minerals and the disposal of toxic electronic waste to the psychologically damaging effects of content moderation. As with all labor relations, race, gender, and geography play a role, determining which workers receive fair compensation for their labor or are even deemed real workers worthy of a wage at all. Automation, whether real or fake, hasn't undone these disturbing dynamics, and may well intensify them.

## Gilded Chains

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For many, the concept of fauxtimation may conjure the famous image of the Mechanical Turk, a fanciful eighteenth-century contraption that purportedly knew how to play chess. (In truth, the Turk was an elaborate hoax with a human player hidden under its board.) Amazon adopted the Turk as its mascot to advertise its crowdsourcing service, Amazon Mechanical Turk, which enables an enormous distributed workforce to perform piecemeal tasks for less than minimum wage even though most “turkers” reside in the United States. (Automation cheerleaders like Rensi must be crushed that no app has yet figured out how fries can be bagged from afar.) Amazon's cheeky slogan

—“artificial artificial intelligence”—acknowledges that there are still plenty of things egregiously underpaid people do better than robots.

But a better predecessor for fauxtimation as I understand it would be Thomas Jefferson’s dumbwaiter—which, if it were invented today, would probably be called the “smartwaiter,” in keeping with Silicon Valley’s intelligence-fetishizing argot. Jefferson is hailed as a great American thinker and tinkerer. But he also, arguably, deserves credit as the first great American fauxtomator. His legendary estate, Monticello, was full of ingenious devices.

Jefferson did not invent the dumbwaiter himself, but was an avid user, as Monticello’s website makes clear: “The dumbwaiters—some of which were built at Monticello—were on casters so that they could be wheeled to the table. A guest who dined at the President’s House during Jefferson’s tenure recalled: ‘by each individual was placed a dumbwaiter, containing everything necessary for the progress of dinner from beginning to end.’”

A YouTube video produced by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation goes into greater detail, showing exactly how the historic devices worked. As we’re encouraged to marvel at the dumbwaiter’s quaint design, a gentle voiceover struggles to adequately grapple with the cruelty behind Jefferson’s contraptions:

*In Jefferson’s dining room, he installs dumbwaiters into both sides of the fireplace mantel. A weight drops, and a bottle rises from the wine cellar directly below the dining room. Just outside the dining room is a revolving door with shelves on it, so when the food is ready to serve, it can be brought upstairs, loaded on the shelves, and the door turned into the room. These gadgets impress visitors, but they also allow Jefferson to hide something from his visitors and that is the reality of slavery... One of Jefferson’s own visitors noted these things that Jefferson was doing—noted Jefferson’s conversations about what he called “ameliorating slavery,” as though it could be made better—and her observation was simply this: that Jefferson was doing nothing more than gilding the chains of slavery.*

Jefferson gilded chains by making them hard to see. Slaves (“members of the slave community” as the video awkwardly dubs them) cooked hot food and put it on shelves, making it appear as if the evening’s fare had been conjured by magic. The same hidden hands whisked away dirty plates just as quickly. Slaves also stood at the ready in the basement, waiting to load up any wine the master and his guests required. The appearance of seemingly automated abundance Jefferson so doggedly cultivated required substantial additional labor—the labor of making labor seem to disappear.

More than 150 years later, black workers in Detroit toiling at what were widely regarded as America’s most secure and iconic jobs—the automobile assembly line—called out another form of false innovation. “Speedup, bad working conditions, automation,” said radical organizer and editor John Watson in 1968, where “one black man does the job previously done by three white men,” could better be described as “niggermation.”

As Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin make clear in *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, the term caught on and for good reason: “In 1946, some 550,000 auto workers had produced a little more than three million vehicles, but in 1970 some 750,000 auto workers had produced a little more than eight million vehicles.” The rapid pace took a devastating toll of people’s health and lives, leaving millions of workers disabled or dead; one study from the period estimated “sixty-five on-the-job deaths per day among autoworkers.” Auto industry executives credited the industry’s productivity boom to advances in machinery, but the predominantly black workforce knew it was in fact due to old-fashioned exploitation, not automation: heavier workloads and unsafe, unhealthy conditions.

## Machine Dreams

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Over 2,000 years ago Aristotle dreamt of a self-weaving loom that would end slavery and exploitation. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Luddites broke weaving machines in protest against the domination and destitution that came with the new contraptions, only to be unfairly remembered as opponents of progress. Today, in our own optimistic reveries about labor-saving devices, we too often forget to ask: who owns the looms?

There is no denying that technological possibilities that could hardly be imagined a generation ago now exist, and that artificial intelligence and advances in machine learning and vision put a whole new range of jobs at risk. Entire industries have already been automated into nonexistence: Kodak was decimated by digital photography and Instagram, Netflix and Amazon killed off Blockbuster, and ATMs made countless bank tellers obsolete.

The problem is that the emphasis on technological factors alone, as though “disruptive innovation” comes from nowhere or is as natural as a cool breeze, casts an air of blameless inevitability over something that has deep roots in class conflict. The phrase “robots are taking our jobs” gives technology agency it doesn’t (yet?) possess, whereas “capitalists are making targeted investments in robots designed to weaken and replace human workers so they can get even richer” is less catchy but more accurate.

Capitalism needs workers to be and feel vulnerable, and because automation has an ideological function as well as a technological dimension, leftists must keep intervening in conversations about technological change and what to do about it. Instead of capitulating to the owning class’s loose talk of automation as a foreordained next phase of production, we should counter with demands that are both visionary and feasible: a federal job guarantee that provides meaningful work to all who want it or job sharing through a significant reduction in the workweek. When pundits predict mass unemployment

following a robot takeover, we should call for collective ownership of the robots and generous social benefits detached from employment status, including pushing for a progressive variation of a universal basic income under a rallying cry that updates the 1970s socialist feminist slogan to Wages for *All* Work—not just the work that bosses recognize as worthy of a meager paycheck.

We have to recognize both the dangers and possibilities associated with automation while relentlessly poking holes in rhetoric that seeks to conflate technology's present and potential capacities with an inescapable, and deeply exploitative, way of organizing labor and compensation. Where fauxtimation attempts to pass as automation, we should call it out as such.

Of course capitalists want working people to be precarious, pitted against one another, and frightened about what the future may hold. Of course they want us to think that if we dare to push back and demand more than scraps the robots will replace us—that we can be automated away at the push of a button. They may wish that were the case, and are no doubt investing their fortunes toward making it seem so. But it, and indeed anything like it, has not come close to being true. If the automated day of judgment were actually nigh, they wouldn't need to invent all these apps to fake it.

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